DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 886 PS 029 170

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TITLE More H.E.L.P.: How To Enjoy Living with a Preadolescent.
INSTITUTION National Middle School Association, Columbus, OH.
ISBN ISBN-1-56090-125-0
PUB DATE 1992-00-00
NOTE 20p.; This booklet is not available in Spanish. For original H.E.L.P. booklet in both English and Spanish, see PS 029 169.
AVAILABLE FROM National Middle School Association, 4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300, Westerville, OH 43081; Tel: 800-528-NMSA (Toll-Free); Web site: http://www.nmsa.org; e-mail: info@NMSA.org (ID No. 1111, $16).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescent Behavior; Adolescent Development; Behavior Development; *Child Rearing; *Developmental Stages; *Emotional Adjustment; Middle School Students; Middle Schools; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Materials; *Preadolescents

ABSTRACT

Noting that early adolescence is a time of tremendous growth and change for both youth and their families, this booklet, the second in a series prepared for parents/guardians of children ages 10-15, is intended to help parents adapt to these changes. The booklet describes typical behavior of preadolescents and offers advice to parents on responding appropriately. Topics covered in this booklet include: (1) there is no "normal"; (2) preadolescents' tendency to deny; (3) their need for privacy; (4) their learning to accept consequences; and (5) their blossoming idealism. (EV)

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How to Enjoy Living with a Preadolescent

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denying

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accepting consequences

Idealism

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Introduction

This is the second in a series of booklets prepared for parents/guardians of children ages 10-15. Early adolescence is a time of tremendous growth and change, a rollercoaster time for both the young persons experiencing these years and the families that surround them. But they are wonderful years as well. Middle schoolers are enthusiastic, energetic, filled with ideas, and generally good-humored. They are capable of playing complicated musical instruments, learning a second language, and creating pieces of art and writing that are amazingly profound.

Change, however, is not without its price. Young adolescents are often forgetful, disorganized, moody, and irritable. They engage in power plays, they put off even the simplest of chores, and worry about minor aches and pains. All of these characteristics are normal and passing, but they also require special understanding and support.

National Middle School Association (NMSA) hopes to offer some insights into the normal concerns adults have about their children during the middle school years. NMSA is committed to providing information on all aspects of the early adolescence years, but this publication is directed specifically to those whose lives are most clearly intertwined with youngsters in middle level schools — their families. The concerns expressed by parents of middle schoolers form the basis of this booklet, which we hope will give you a true appreciation for the pleasure of living with a preadolescent.

Get Used To Differences there is

Recently a mother volunteered to supervise a group of students from her son's seventh-grade class during a field trip. When she arrived at the school, the students were already gathered in their groups and the teacher was giving last-minute instructions. As the mother looked over her group of six youngsters, she immediately concluded someone had made a mistake. These were surely not her son's classmates! Two of the girls in the group were taller than she was — and obviously very mature physically as well. She thought one might be wearing makeup. A third girl, chatting quietly with the other two, was significantly smaller, and looked to be in about fifth grade. The boys, too, were of various heights, most of them hovering around five feet tall; but one, like the girls, was much taller. One boy was whispering to her son, and she could tell from the timbre of his whisper that his voice had changed. The mother decided that this must be an all-school field trip, not just a seventh-grade outing.

She tiptoed over to a teacher standing nearby and said, **"I thought this was going to be a seventh-grade field trip."**

"It is," the teacher replied.

"You mean," the mother asked incredulously, **"all those kids in my group over there are seventh graders?"** Scanning the rest of the groups, she noted that they, too, were a mix of students who looked as if they ranged in age from fifth grade to high school.

"Yep," smiled the teacher. **"As a matter of fact, the groups are arranged by birthdays, so most of the kids in each group are almost exactly the same age. One thing middle schoolers have in common is that they are all different."**

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NO "normal"

That mother learned something very important on the seventh-grade field trip. As far as looks and/or physical development, there is no "normal" for middle schoolers. During this time of rapid growth and change, there is no grade-specific timetable, no chart against which to measure one's child or his or her classmates. Some middle-level students begin to develop early. They begin to grow taller (sometimes over a few months or even weeks); the angles and planes of their faces change; body hair appears or becomes darker; and body odor becomes a regular concern. These changes are not necessarily related to menstruation in girls, which may have begun as early as third grade. Instead, this new growing and maturing is part of being a preadolescent, and both boys and girls alike are affected. Not only are they affected by the changes themselves, but also by the fact that nature pursues a most erratic timetable, and their classmates are often not on the same timetable as they are. What most middle schoolers hate is being different from everyone else; yet that's exactly what early adolescence deals out to them.

When one wants to be just like everyone else, being different is more than just worrisome, it is sometimes a real burden.

Red hair, naturally curly hair, too-straight hair, freckles, an unusual nose, large feet, allergies, eyeglasses, being tall, being short — all of these, in spite of what adults may say, conspire to make a middle schooler feel awkward and insecure. But then, so do blonde or brown hair, small feet, a button nose and dimples. It is a rare middle schooler who is satisfied and comfortable with his or her looks. The fact that everyone else accepts them as they are is not relevant. Preadolescents (most of whom spend an inordinate amount of time in front of the mirror) are quick to criticize themselves and the way they look.

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Parents can help middle schoolers through these uneasy times in several ways.

First, encourage your child to see that he or she is at the beginning of growth and change, not the end. The body one has in middle school is not the body one has forever. Show your child a picture of a favorite aunt or uncle when he or she was in the middle grades. (Probably showing them a picture of yourself won't be impressive; at this age, they're not exactly thrilled with the way you turned out!) Encourage your child to see the tremendous physical changes that one experiences all through one's teenage years.

Try not to criticize or even remark on their looks. Middle schoolers are mentally criticizing their own looks constantly even when they act arrogant and vain. As a result, even neutral or well-intentioned positive remarks may be misinterpreted. Underneath the hairspray and the newest fad item, middle schoolers feel edgy and unsure.

If your opinion is asked, offer it gingerly.

"Why don't you try the white sweater and see if you like it better?"

"I wonder if that heavy leather jacket won't be too warm inside the mall?"

"I really liked the outfit you wore Tuesday."

Don't try to dress your middle schooler according to your tastes or in line with what you think the neighbors will think. A preadolescent is not a child to be dressed up to be **"cute."** Neither should any child be encouraged to dress in a way that is mature beyond his or her years. Avoid smoothing, straightening, plucking, moistening, or brushing your preadolescent's clothes or hair, especially in front of others. If something needs to be done in this regard, unobtrusively encourage the middle schooler to see to it himself or herself.

To them, growing

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Denying

"Is there something on your left sleeve?"

"Maybe you should check the back of your hair one more time."

Remember, to middle schoolers, their peers are usually the final and most important judge of their appearance. Because of your age and ignorance, your opinion of how a middle schooler should look or dress is often of little worth. They believe their friends will "tell them like it is." This negation of your ability to make clear judgments about their looks does not last forever, but it can be frustrating during the middle school years.

Clothing is sometimes used as a way of separating oneself from one's parents. It should rarely be the basis for a battle. We say to them, **"Remember, it's what you are inside that counts."** Maybe WE should remember that more often.

to middle schoolers, their peers are usually the final and most important judge of their appearance!

up means freedom

On the verge of g

"Who left the peanut butter out ?"

"It wasn't me!"

"Who took the message from Mrs. Baker but forgot to tell me?"

"Don't look at me; I didn't do it!"

"Are these your shoes lying here where every body will trip over them?"

"No."

If it weren't so infuriating, middle schoolers' tendency to deny everything would definitely be amusing. And deny they do. They even deny they deny. This would be understandable if adults were harsh, arbitrary, and lacking in understanding. All of us are tempted to deny having done or not done something when faced with uncomfortable consequences. But middle schoolers deny almost everything, big or small. This is not the fantasy tale-telling of their childhood, nor is it the look-you-straight-in-the-eye-lying that may come later in their teenage years. This is constant, spontaneous, and often unwarranted, denial of responsibility for anything that seems to put them in a bad light. Why do they behave this way?

One reason is many preadolescents think adults ARE harsh, arbitrary, and lacking in understanding, especially if scoldings make them squirm, if they are not consulted about the reasonableness of our rules, or if we fail to give in to their desires and demands. In other words, if we don't do what they want, we're "mean." We are also "unfair," and what we expect of them is generally "stupid." Parents can accept this better if they understand that although middle schoolers are self-centered and selfish, they are also uncertain, scared, and on the verge of growing up but not yet there.

rowing up

To them, growing up means freedom from being told what to do all the time. It means getting to make all of one's own decisions. It means being relieved of consequences when one makes mistakes. Unfortunately, we all learn that adulthood encompasses none of these ideas, but preadolescents haven't had time to learn that yet. They have recently come to the realization that they are very different from their parents, that they can disagree with their parents, that adults can make mistakes, and that all parents are not the same.

This new set of understandings leads them to want to test their own individuality by ridiculing or criticizing parents' values or reacting against parents' rules and expectations as a matter of course. At the same time, they still need their parents' love and support, and they are often bewildered and frightened when they hear themselves talking back.

This internal battle also leads to regularly responding by denying. Immediately denying gives one a chance to step back and take stock of the situation. Will I be hurt by this? Will I be criticized? Will I be subject to more demands, and punishment even? One can always start off by denying and then change later. But to admit is to let anything happen that can happen.

This period of denying everything that middle schoolers go through doesn't usually last long, and it's an important protection for a fragile ego lying beneath the surface of a preadolescent's cocky exterior. In a few short months, as their self-esteem is boosted, they realize that compromise works better than conflict. They also begin to see that adulthood is ever more appealing, but not for the reasons they had originally thought.

understand that although middle schoolers are self-centered and selfish, they are also uncertain and scared

humor!

In the meantime, try these tacti

Be careful of your tone of voice. An irritated and/or accusative voice can be threatening in itself. Hearing this tone, preadolescents automatically go on the defensive, and worthwhile communication shuts down.

If the issue is minor, keep things light. The shoes on the floor, the wet towel on the bed, the carton left open—these are maddening, perhaps, but not earth shattering. Call attention to them in a humorous way, so your middle-schooler knows you want action but you aren't being punitive. **"Either the cat's smarter than I thought or you left the milk carton open on the counter. One of you please put it back before it spoils."**

If the issue is major, start by listening. Starting off an important discussion with threats, put-downs, or lectures brings the discussion to an immediate close. Although you feel strongly about your side, let your child know you will listen to his or her side first, then DO listen without interrupting. **"Tell me about this English grade." "I'm concerned about this fight at school." "I was worried when you didn't get home at the time we set; tell me what happened."** If there are consequences, carry through with them, but avoid angry reactions.

Ignore trivial denials. For a time in a middle schooler's life, denying becomes almost a habit. Most of the time you can ignore it, just as you ignore other preadolescent habits, like practicing belching or rolling their eyes. A statement like, **"I know you didn't leave them there, but would you pick them up anyway? Thanks."** will get the task done without putting stress on the relationship.

If the issue is minor,

Call attention to them in a humorous way, so your middle-schooler knows you want action but you aren't being punitive.

Most middle schoolers want to be left alone — at least by their parents. This is not so much true of ten- or eleven-year-olds as it is of older preadolescents. During the early months of middle school years, your child may be filled with constant chatter and concern. He or she may want to do the things you are doing, be interested in much of what you are interested in, and admire your accomplishments and your work. Suddenly, this stops. Your child, once a charming conversationalist, becomes monosyllabic. Your values and interests begin to be questioned, then criticized, and are finally treated with apathy. Being seen in the company of a parent, no matter how appropriate the circumstance (at a family outing, for instance), is considered by a preadolescent to be a social mistake. "Leave me alone!" becomes a constant refrain.

"Leave me ALONE!"

This need for privacy is understandable when we reflect on a middle schooler's stage in growing up. There are so many changes going on inside them and around them that they need time to process these changes and adjust their thinking. They also spend time daydreaming and fantasizing. This gives them an opportunity to "try on" different personalities and explore different future paths without ever leaving their bedrooms. Some like to read adventures or romances as a way of vicariously and safely experiencing the emotions and fantasies bubbling up inside them. They also like to read or hear about young people their age or slightly older who have problems similar to theirs or who overcome handicaps. All this needs to be done alone, away from adult demands or comments.

In public, being with one's parents or family smacks of being a child. Preadolescents, therefore, walk one or two steps ahead or one or two steps behind. Parents go to games and activities, but their own child will not speak to them. Middle schoolers begin to say, **"Let me off a block ahead." "Don't come up to school!"** A conversation in the car is suddenly halted when the preadolescent sees friends on the street and slides to the floor of the car rather than be seen with one's parent.

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Privacy

Preadolescents also become uncommunicative about what they are doing or where they are going.

This can be a power play; but it is also part of that need to be more and more separated from parents and act independently.

We know that preadolescents aren't ready to be as independent as they wish, but we can make some accommodations.

Allow some unstructured time. Some middle schoolers lives are filled (often by their own choice) with so many activities, they seldom have time for themselves. It is up to us to make sure that they have an opportunity for regular unstructured time in which to reflect on and digest all that is happening to them. If your child has the luxury of a bedroom alone, allow it to be used as a refuge. Others may take long walks or just sit someplace. Unstructured time doesn't mean unsupervised time. Supervision — even from a "distance" — is still appropriate at this age; but remember the need to be alone is great.

Sometimes use an indirect approach. Direct questions often sound like control to a preadolescent. It is your right to know where your child is going and set a time for return. Nonetheless, this can be handled in a way that doesn't sound like nagging or prying.
"I guess you'll be going to the mall, so make sure you're home by 9:15." "If I need you, can I call Janet's to find out where you are?" "Remember, dinner's at six, so I'll expect you to be home by then."

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Pick up information where you can. Middle schoolers are often giving us information, but we miss it because we are not listening for it. Three of the best sources of information are the car pool, the sleepover, and the pizza party. By some warp in the preadolescent universe, parents become deaf and/or invisible during these activities. As a result, the conversation that goes on provides a lot of answers to parents' questions. Adults must be careful not to speak or react; just carefully consider these things in your heart. Other sources of information are open telephone conversations, messages written on the exterior of notebooks and bookcovers, and conversations with the middle schooler on seemingly unrelated topics.

Finally, remember that the command, "Leave me alone!" is not a command to be followed all the time. Middle schoolers don't want to be abandoned on the stormy sea of preadolescence. Let your middle schooler know that you are always ready to have him or her around, and that you will be interested in whatever is going on in his or her life. Questions like, **"Is everything okay?"** and **"Are you all right?"** usually won't get you very far. Try picking up on the emotion you sense from their behavior.
"You must be worried about tryouts this week." "You seem discouraged about something. Can I help?" "Your friendship with Jennifer seems to be frustrating you. Want to talk about it?"

"If I'd have known that was going to happen, I wouldn't have done it."

"Why do these things always happen to me?"

"I just thought it would be funny."

"It's not my fault. "

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Accepting Consequences

Middle schoolers have a lot of trouble foreseeing and accepting consequences for their actions. Part of this is due to inexperience, part to their lack of training in thinking ahead, and part to their tendency to live in the "now." All preadolescents are trying and experiencing things for the first time; this is true of any stage in life. But in preadolescence, the forewarnings and guidance of adults are not always so available as they were during the younger years. A dare taken, a feat attempted, a challenge accepted — there isn't the time or inclination on the part of a young adolescent to check with an adult. Nor can parents prepare a middle schooler for every circumstance that might possibly be presented.

Also because of their youth, most preadolescents haven't had the experience or training in decision making that would help them make choices while considering the consequences. During their younger years, adults always went through the process for them or assisted them. **("Now, if you decide to do that, have you considered this?" "If you choose the green ones, they'll go with your shorts outfit; the red ones, though, will go with anything.")** In some cases, adults have made ALL the decisions, leaving the middle schooler with almost no personal decision-making skills with which to work.

HELP y schooler to make de

Finally, middle schoolers live in the "now," and in the pursuit of the enjoyment of the moment, fail to think ahead.

As a result, middle schoolers do things that cause us to make comments such as,

"Did you use your brain at all?"

"What were you thinking of?"

"How could you have done that?"

and, the recurring, **"Would you please act your age?"**

and the tone of these complaints compounds the problem. They play pranks and practical jokes, they take risks, they break things, they take things apart, they try impossible recipes, they say thoughtless things, they fail to meet deadlines or call if they're going to be late. We get furious, they seem surprised. We see them as irresponsible and immature; they see us as arbitrary and unjust.

Can this family be saved? YES!

Help your middle schooler learn how to make decisions. Decision-making does not come naturally. It has to be learned. When making decisions on their own, as middle schoolers will be doing more and more, the steps in decision making should become spontaneous, especially those which deal with considering alternatives and possible consequences.

our middle learn how cisions

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Their seeming irresponsibility and thoughtlessness...

Try to think ahead for your preadolescent. Since middle schoolers focus on the "now," they are regularly unprepared for anything beyond the routine. Their ride doesn't show up at the mall? They don't think to call, even if they have money for an emergency. It's not an emergency to them; as a result, a punishment is uncalled for. The teacher didn't ask for the homework? Then it must not be due. No one can take food into the shop? Well, nobody said anything about taking in a beverage. As much as possible, try to think ahead for them and remind them as soon as possible before the action is to take place. **"Remember, I'll be upset if you aren't home by 9:00.**

You will be punished if you are late and don't call."

"This homework paper looks great. Be sure to turn it in whether the teacher asks for it or not."

If your preadolescent makes a poor choice, be patient. We all make good choices and poor choices. All choices have consequences. Be sure to commend your youngsters, no matter what their age, on their good choices (we often forget to do this). If a poor choice is made, explain as objectively as you can why the choice was not a good one. In some cases, the natural consequences make this obvious (a baseball mitt left in the rain). In other cases, though, we are imposing consequences and preadolescents need to know why in order to avoid future uncomfortable results. Even so, since no two happenstances are exactly alike, a young adolescent may not transfer what he or she learned one time to the next time. Be patient. These are learning years that will carry them into adulthood. Their seeming irresponsibility and thoughtlessness will not last long.

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Blossoming Idealism

One of the great joys of having a preadolescent is the realization that he or she is tremendously aware of and interested in issues that affect society. They become socially concerned. They will ask questions about and are willing to devote time to causes from the rain forest to working at a local senior citizens' home. They can be articulate, passionate, and an activist. This energy is not necessarily replicated when it comes time to clean their rooms or get their homework done, but it is sincere and resourceful when they are engaged in their favorite cause.

You can build on this by encouraging your middle schooler to participate in service projects offered by your church, school, or community. Some middle schoolers love working with younger children; others are willing to write letters and make phone calls in support of an issue. Talk with them about their concerns. Do not laugh or "pooh-pooh" their enthusiasm. These are the very ideals they will carry with them into adulthood, and the ones which will bring hope for the continued progress of mankind.

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Enjoy Living With Your Preadolescent

Middle schoolers are unique. They grow at different rates, seem adult one minute and infantile the next. One minute they're whining, but a minute later they offer such insightful comments on life that tears spring to our eyes. All in all, they are very different from each other and from the earlier version of themselves. Sometimes we need to coax, cajole, remind, explain, and assist. Other times, we only need to stand back and be proud. Let your middle schooler know that you love and enjoy him or her just as much now as you did when he or she was younger, and that you'll be there every step of the way until you are no longer needed.

Uh, make sure you knock first... and ignore the laundry on the floor.

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H E L P — How to Enjoy Living with a Preadolescent

H E L P — Get Ready for Changes *Spanish Edition*

For order information call 1-800-528-NMSA

The author Judith Bacon

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